New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1946

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"Obsession"

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 2, 1946

Rathbone and Leontovich Can't Quite Make 'Obsession' Obsess

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Louis Verneuil's bit of 1928 trickery, "Jealousy," turned up again last evening at the Plymouth under the title of "Obsession," with Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich playing the entire cast of characters. It can't be called a revival, I suppose, for a new adaptation by Jane Hinton is being used in place of the original by Eugene Walter; but it plays like a revival.

It isn't that Miss Leontovich and Mr. Rathbone aren't good, for they are—although for the first few moments Miss L. played in so low and unintelligible a voice that I thought I was going to see a one-character drama. But no amount of resourcefulness on the part of two actors can make Monsieur Verneuil's little exercise anything more than a pallid guignol—a clever one-acter made into three acts, with an oh, so gallic finish.

California's Homer Curran, with the assistance of a couple of associates named Lewis and Young, has presented "Obsession" quite smartly. Stewart Chaney's setting of a Paris apartment is tres chic and 20th Century-Fox's dressmaker, Adrian, has clad Miss Leontovich in a wardrobe which clings to her as intimately as a Dodger fan clutches hope.

The Crime Passionel.

The play opens on a note of sophisticated comedy, with the two people in it having come from their wedding. They are newlyweds, perhaps, but not strangers, having been lovers for some time. He is a playwright, she a business woman. Each has had other affairs, but This Time It's Love.

They have a nice time pawing and cooing for a while, until the husband begins a jealous fretting over the attentions of his wife's supposed guardian. She is an agile liar, but he catches her in so many untruths that he murders the guardian—offstage, of course. The comedy is better than the melodrama.

'Obsession'

A three-act play by Louis Verneuil adapted by Jane Hinton was presented at the Plymouth by Homer Curran in association with Russell Lewis and Howard Young, starring Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich. Staged by Reginald Denham, designed and lighted by Stewart Chaney with gowns designed by Adrian.

THE CAST:

Maurice.....Basil Rathbone
Nadya.....Eugenie Leontovich

Offstage happenings are the besetting trouble with plays having small casts. In "Obsession" events are intereting and amusing when they occur in, and develop in, the honeymoon apartment. But when the woman has to start telling what she did when she visited her sick sister, or when the man tells how he throttled the guardian, attention wavers. I'd rather see a murder any old time than get it second hand from a prejudiced witness.

Miss Leontovich has humor and well-controlled vitality—and is as graceful as a cat. Mr. Rathbone, on leave from the social whirl of Hollywood, is handsome and persuasive. But the two of them can't put into "Obsession" more than Verneuil wrote in the first place, and he didn't write quite enough.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 2, 1946

'Obsession' a Drama of Tense Emotion

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Obsession," the two character play which opened last night at the Plymouth, is a relentless emotional workout.

Its intricate plot requires deep concentration, for one is never quite certain about the real truth behind an incident. The situations are melodramatic without compromise. Yet many moments of the play have parallels in every domestic picture.

"Obsession" is likely to prove more appealing to women than men. After all it is the woman here who gets what she wants.

Nadya is a female who sees herself as the obsession of men she snares. She has married Maurice, formerly her lover, and the play opens with their homecoming the night of their wedding.

After a few light seductive moments, the trouble starts. Maurice finds a ring which Nadya claimed she lost.

Wife Is Ruthless.

It becomes clear that Nadya is a ruthless and chronic liar. Hurt and angry, Maurice soon reveals that his real obsession is jealousy. He torments himself and her with curiosity, and she incites him with evasions.

The ring was a gift from one Lamberthier. Nadya claims he is a rich godfather who loaned her money to start a dress shop. Maurice cannot accept this unlikely description, even after Lamberthier is found murdered.

After wringing from his wife an admission that she was with the dead man the night he was murdered, Maurice forces her to confess the killing.

It is not long afterwards that he unwittingly reveals his knowledge, for a very good reason, that she could not be guilty. He wanted her to confess her attachment with Lamberthier to justify his own jealous rage.

Another Arrested for Murder.

Then a telephone call informs them that one de Roche has been arrested for the murder.

The connection of de Roche with the couple is obscure, even in the end. But this situation is just the kind over which Nadya's ruthless conniving nature will triumph. The dead man's money presumably comes to her. Men, or anything else, can get lost in the running.

It is difficult to brief a story so contrived with clews and insinuations. Picked apart with tweezers it might well prove a tight pattern. As it plays, an audience better accept the showy violence and not grasp for real motives.

Agonizing Intimacy.

"Obsession" might be an irritating wrangle in less skilled hands. Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich give it the agonizing intimacy and the taut progress it requires.

Rathbone makes Maurice a man of charm and sensitivity who disintegrates with inevitable stubbornness. His sure style is gripping and his confident attack suits the play's sweeping emotion, though certain moments of impassioned pantomine suggest hysteria.

Leontovich has the tougher of two superhuman assignments. Stark truth never passes her lips. She establishes this with a falter, then a tumble of words in constant nervous tenseness.

Fascinating Performance.

She must be seductive and lushly feline, which she becomes with plastic attitudes and physical grace. She exudes the subtle amoral looseness that makes Nadya potentially vicious. It is a fascinating performance.

The limits to a play of only two characters are obvious. It drains the actors and it strains the audience.

Devices show. Action and variety are reduced to a sediment. Reginald Denham has directed the play with ingenious movement and tempo under the circumsiances. The single set of Stewart Chaney with two adjoining rooms offers a maximum of freedom.

It is hard to find virtues in such limited construction of a play. Violated by even a minor voice or figure, the intense duel would be refreshed and lose little of its bruising friction.

New York Post

OCTOBER 2, 1946

Lost Youth's Musty Air Shrouds 'Obsession'

By Vernon Rice

The musty air of one's lost youth, when a French novel or play were things to be forbidden, floated across the stage of the Plymouth last night and clung like a heavy fog through the performance of Homer Curran's production of "Obsession," which he produced in association with Russell Lewis and Howard Young.

It even enveloped the stars and the play's only performers, Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich, so that they seemed not of this era, but of days almost forgotten.

Many obvious reasons for the French play's apparent antiquity come to mind. Eighteen years ago it appeared on the New York scene to startle the box-office customers of the Maxine Elliott as a two character novelty, "Jealousy," with John Halliday and Fay Bainter. The Louis Verneuil work then had as its adaptor Eugene Walter.

We didn't see the 1928 production, but in reading the Walter script, at its best, "Jealousy" comes off as a tour de force with some neat, compact, ironic writing, highly artificial, offering a couple of actors a field day upon a stage.

Not So New

Since that time too many stunts have taken place in the theatre, so that the novelty of a play of this kind has worn a bit thin.

Now "Jealousy" emerges as "Obsession" with a new adaptation by Jane Hinton. Maurice is now a playwright instead of an artist, and Valerie, the French girl, becomes Nadya, the Russian woman. Lambertier, the off-stage antagonist, still remains Lambertier, the off-stage antagonist. On stage he is represented by the telephone and exposition.

Had Miss Hinton left the ending alone and not removed its ironic twist, and had she really modernized the script by bringing the Paris she writes about up to date, things might not have been so bad.

We know that Paris is still concerned about l'amour, l'amour, but it is also concerned about heat, light, food, the black market, politics and world peace. Neither Miss Hinton's Paris nor her play ever heard of these things.

As it now stands, "Obsession" is not unlike an out of style, worn-out frock, once a copy of a Parisian original.

First Night Jitters

In the best of shape, the play needs tense, taut direction and acting, with quick changes in moods and an over-all feeling of impending disaster. These qualities were lacking in Reginald Denham's direction and in the playing of Mr. Rathbone and Miss Leontovich.

They could have been there at one time, however, for last night the stage of the Plymouth was so littered with shattered nerves brought on by first-night jitters, that it was hard to judge just what qualities the actors and director were aiming to incorporate in the play.

The only one who fared at all well was Stewart Chaney, the designer. He's getting to be quite a man with these whole apartments on one stage. This time he didn't include the kitchen, as he did in his set for "The Voice of the Turtle," but the audience did get a good view of the living room and bedroom.

It's a lush set, full of Parisian atmosphere.

"Obsession" needed more last evening, though, than a lush set.

Journal American

OCTOBER 2, 1946

'Obsession' Opens At the Plymouth

By ROBERT GARLAND

Please don't chide me if you fail to enjoy "Obsession" as much as I enjoyed "Obsession" last night in New York's Plymouth Theatre. Or as much as I enjoyed "Obsession" a month or more ago in Chicago's Erlanger. For the play Jane Hinton fashioned from the Louis Verneuil "M. Lambertier" is a purposely artificial piece of theatrical hokus-pokus which never dares stand up against the rigors of reality.

That's dandy! To tell the happy truth, "Obsession" is for nothing, against nothing and about nothing in particular. It gives no hang for the big bad outside world; it has no care who knows it. From a quarter to nine until a quarter to eleven, it takes you off to a never-never-apartment in a never-never-Paris where love carries on like crazy. There one and one make one and one is plenty.

Fashioned into English, the Louis Verneuil artificiality is no stranger to our Broadway. As good as 18 years ago, A. H. Woods produced it in an unlovely adaptation by Eugene Walter at the lovely Maxine Elliott's Theatre. Under the equally awkward name of "Jealousy," Fay Bainter and John Halliday acted it to everybody's satisfaction. After 136 performances, it moved to Chicago.

There, in 1928, a rising young actress was getting her name put up in lights in honor of her work in James B. Fagan's "And So To Bed." The rising young actress was Eugenie Leontovitch.

Unholy Third

By any name, including its rightful "M. Lambertier," last night's "Obsession" would be hot, bothered and triangular, with the third side of the triangle invisible. Nadya, formerly Valerie, and Maurice, always Maurice, are visible, however, and M. Lamberthier, whose first name must be Harvey, is always in the offing. It's he who, burning in the background, tears Nadya from Maurice's arms and vice versa.

Even when this unholy third is dead as the "Hidden Horizon" which preceded "Obsession" at the Plymouth, he still pursues the middle-aging lovers. So relentlessly does he pursue them that, when the final act is ending, Maurice is moving toward the jail house and Nadya is standing down-stage center, puffing like an oil stove. Ah Paris, France, take her away before more smoke gets in her eyes!

But it was fine while it lasted, with, as I forgot to tell you, always-Maurice murdering Harvey Lambertier behind the scenery and sometimes-Nadya rallying 'round him royally. In this latter day transcription by Jane Hinton, Louis Verneuil's is a rare and resourceful twosome in which the action is seldom allowed to lag and the suspense is seldom allowed to sag. "Obsession" marches on!

You, of course, may find its ardent artificiality wearing. Not I! I enjoy its never-never-story, in its never-never-apartment and its never-never-Paris. Reality keep away from its door!

Tasty Dish

In the actorial custody of Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich, reality keeps away from its door all right. Actor and actress see to that. Mr. Rathbone, as the Maurice who loves more well than wisely, gives his play and partner everything he's got. Not quite as sizzling as he was on Clark St., Chicago, he's sizzling enough on 45th St., New York. And his hands are mighty handy.

Miss Leontovich, as the Nadya who loves more wisely, it seems, than well, gives her play and partner everything she's got. What she's got are the "vodka-like zest," the "caviar-like tang," referred to in the programs. In her "strictly-from-the-Volga accent" she woos, wins and loses Mr. Rathbone as, in all his acting from "The Taming of the Shrew" through "The Captive" to "Romeo and Juliet," he's never been wooed, won and lost before.

That's all there is, save for an on-stage telephone that rings its bell off and an off-stage voice that delivers a morning paper and finally comes to get him, disguised, but still unseen, as two polite but firm gendarmes. Oh, yes, and Stewart Chaney's rightly artificial background, Adrian's rightly artificial gowns and Reginald Denham's rightly artificial direction.

So, again, please don't chide me if you fail to enjoy "Obsession" as much as I relished it last night at the Plymouth. Maybe it's not your tasty, if cooked-up, dish de theatre. Here and now, it's mine!

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 2, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Pas de Deux

LOUIS VERNEUIL'S bedroom melodrama, once known hereabouts as "Jealousy," is still a tedious stunt under the new title of "Obsession." Its two characters, with assists from a convenient telephone, chat interminably at the Plymouth about the seamier aspects of sex, strangulations and the guillotine. The off-stage doings seem reasonably fascinating in a morbid way as they are discussed by Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich in the current production. It is a pity that more of them do not transpire on the stage. As it stands "Obsession" is a mannered portrayal of a mannered play.

* * *

The Jane Hinton adaptation does not differ radically from that which brought Fay Bainter and John Halliday to Broadway in 1928. Once more a poule de luxe marries a struggling artist for no good or apparent reason, deceives him until his suspicions reach a homicidal pitch and bids him a casual adieu as he is led off to a richly deserved fate. The jealousy has recognizable motivation as the fellow discovers that his wife has maintained a liaison right through their honeymoon. Her pitch is something else again. The climax may be subtle, but it is dramatically dithering.

* * *

In a gallant effort to simulate significant action where there is next to none the stars fidget through a two-room set as though they had a combination of St. Vitus's dance and the seven-year itch. There is considerable lolling on the bridal bed as the lady is trapped in a succession of stuttering lies. There are frequent exits and entrances from living room to bedroom with much business about putting out the lights; there are telephone and door bells ringing and an almost continual changing of clothes.

* * *

Miss Leontvich must get done up in more than half a dozen Adrian creations in the course of the marathon conversation. She handles the robing and disrobing with considerably more skill than the lines and gestures. On one occasion an elegant mink coat almost gets lost in the shuffle. Rathbone contents himself with changing dressing gowns and occasional fiddling with his suspenders. He is far more successful than his coworker in creating moments of melodramatic tension in "Obsession." In his hands, the furies driven cuckold emerges in a half-light of postured portraiture. Verneuil's stage trick demands consummate acting and that it has not had at the Plymouth. The trick itself is painfully transparent, even in Stewart Chaney's neo-Victorian setting.

PM

OCTOBER 3, 1946

—*Kronenberger*

Not Much Cast, Not Much Play

PM Reviews

I missed *Obsession* when it was called *Jealousy* in 1928, but I can't believe that I missed very much. *Jealousy* has been chiefly remembered for containing only two characters—a dramatiic stunt that probably occurs to many playwrights but fortunately seduces very few. For such a stunt not only seems to require more ingenuity than it is worth, but in the act of being ingenious the author forgets to be anything much else. In a certain sense, M. Verneuil may be said to have fashioned a real play out of only two characters. The only thing wrong is that he has fashioned a pretty ridiculous one. I don't believe a single word of it and neither, I suspect, did M. Verneuil.

Reality being out of the question, what remains for *Obsession* to do is to keep you absorbed. Since plenty goes on (if only offstage) in this tale of a loose lady who acquired a jealous husband without bothering to get rid of a wealthy lover, two highly adroit performers might manage to keep you absorbed. Their acting might get you past M. Verneuil's trumpery, dated doings and his translator's literary prose. But Miss Leontovich, as the wife who married neither wisely nor too well, and Mr. Rathbone, as his lady's lie-detector and her paramour's assassin, resourcefully ham up the proceedings. Mr. Rathbone gets in and out of various dressing-gowns and attitudes, and strides about more like a British inspector investigating a crime than a French husband committing one. Miss Leontovich does all right in her comedy moments, and is flouncy and sprawly with assorted bits of business; but she talks most of the evening as though she had her mouth full of caramels, so that what might be art subsides into inaudibility. Both performers, moreover, display too little emotion to arouse any.

As a play, *Obsession* would have much more suspense if it took you longer to find out whether the husband had grounds for being so jealous, and if it then took you longer to find out who committed the murder. But the play could never be more than clever claptrap, or than a show piece for accomplished actors. As currently revived, it is more than anything else a bore. —LOUIS KRONENBERGER

The Sun

OCTOBER 2, 1946

'Obsession' Is Creaky and Monotonous, and the Acting Doesn't Help, Either.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Two players—exactly two—compose the cast of "Obsession," which opened last night at the Plymouth, and I kept wishing that a few more would drop from the proscenium arch or pop out of the wings. For the Louis Verneuil drama is now pretty lifeless, the telephone is silent too long, and you're likely to get more than enough of the limited cast as the evening drags along.

Here is the tale of a Parisian playwright, tortured by jealousy and the unceasing lies of his bride of two months, who is finally driven to murder, his victim being his wife's long-time financial backer and lover. The unhappy husband readily gives himself up when the police call and the woman, at the final curtain, is apparently greatly relieved to be rid of them both.

Eugenie Leontovich and Basil Rathbone now have the roles that were adroitly played by Fay Bainter and John Halliday when Eugene Walter's version of the Verneuil play, then called "Jealousy," was shown to us in 1928. Miss Leontovich and Rathbone have been touring in "Obsession" for many weeks, but neither was able to bring believeability or vitality to the play last night, and both were guilty of considerable overacting. Miss Leontovich was suffering from what seemed a severe cold and was often difficult to understand.

"Obsession" now comes forth as a theater piece that is too creaky, too talky, too monotonous, and you get so that you don't care about Nadya and her lies and her wiles and Maurice and his endless suspicions. Maurice's inquisitions fail to create the suspense and cumulative excitement that used to make such a big second act of Henri Bernstein's "The Thief." And certainly the most interesting character in the Plymouth's new play is the sinister M. Lambertheir, the unseen tyrant who holds Nadya in his power. He would have helped out mightily by making an appearance.

Reginald Denham has staged "Obsession" and the action takes place in a lush Stewart Chaney setting, one showing the living room and bedroom of the apartment to which Nadya brings the tormented Maurice immediately after their wedding.

The only two players now alive who might get away with "Obsession," or make something of a show of it, are known to the trade as the Lunts, Alfred and Lynn. But they're quite busy five blocks to the south.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 2, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After eighteen years, during which many dramas have hired huge casts, the most important aspect of Louis Verneuil's "Obsession" is still the basic fact that it requires only two characters on stage. In 1928 it was known as "Jealousy." Eugene Walter had made the English adaptation, and John Halliday and Fay Bainter were the cast. The new version, which was staged at the Plymouth last evening, was written by Jane Hinton, and the current cast is Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich.

Unless memory is more deceptive than usual, the new version takes the Verneuil story more seriously and Mr. Rathbone and Miss Leontovich play the passion and horror more seriously also. But taking seriously the emotional aspects of this exercise in dramatic dexterity is of doubtful validity. For when the tortured Maurice makes his final exit and the torrid Nadya lights a cigarette pensively, it is to be feared that "Obsession" really has nothing to give except the interesting fact that it is written for two characters.

As a challenge in craftsmanship, that is no mean achievement, and "Obsession" is a genuine play, despite its thin population. To tell an acceptable story of love, infidelity and murder, M. Verneuil had to resort frequently to the telephone, although no more than less constricted playwrights do upon occasion; and he had to hide the maid and the police. (Didn't the police speak in the former version? At least that would be normal for the police.) But he was not otherwise handicapped by the fact that the actors' salary account could be gratifyingly modest on Saturday night; and even with only two characters he succeeded in getting his play out of the living room and into the bedroom in just under five minutes.

The real limitation on "Obsession" is not the brevity of the cast but the quality of the story. It comes out of the bottom drawer, where the dirty linen is thrown away. Although Maurice and Nadya are very happy on their somewhat deferred wedding night, Nadya is still in the power of a rich and unscrupulous lover. Sometime between the first and the second acts, Maurice murders the lover; and then "Obsession" has to decide whether Maurice gets caught or not. Since he apparently left no clues, this is entirely a matter of playwright's choice.

To give the play as much substance as possible, Stewart Chaney has endowed the production with a luxurious Paris apartment setting and a glimpse of rooftops outside; an Adrian has suppued Miss Leontovich with gowns of stupendous smartness, including a cylindrical white creation that has a flourishing fungus arrangement to the rear.

Under Reginald Denham's direction, the entire cast plays with increasing earnestness. On the whole, Mr. Rathbone has the better of it. The neatness of outline in his acting and the pleasant, clipped style he has in speaking are economical ways of playing an artificial drama. He does not ask you to believe in the authenticity of Maurice's soul. As Nadya, Miss Leontovich plays with a depth of feeling that would be moving in a more honest drama. Although she skims humorously over subtleties in comic episodes like an expert comedienne, she takes the big scenes at more than face value. She bestows upon them the genuine emotions of a fine actress.

In this playgoer's opinion, "Obsession" cannot carry that much honest cargo. It is only a cleverly contrived play for two characters.

1947

New York Theatre Critics' Review

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